

Speed or Quality: The Clash of Cultures in Rural Classrooms

速度还是质量：乡村课堂的文化冲突

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提要：本文是教育民族志《去政治化的工作空间——乡村教师的日常工作》中的一章。该研究考察了中国西南山区一所乡级小学——朝阳小学——的教师们的工作状况。这是一所“戴帽初中”，学校包含小学至初中九个年级。

本章分析的焦点是乡村教师们在实施“新课标”的过程中所遭遇的困境以及造成这一困境的结症所在。以“新课标”为指导的教材和教学组织方式对学生的学习自主性要求更高，而学习自主性的培养必须以扎实的读写算技能为基础，扎实的读写算技能的形成又必须依赖一套严格的学习习惯。一些最普通的学习习惯，如上课带纸笔、记笔记、保护课本、有条理地保存笔记和文具等，也许在城镇家庭教育中被视为理所当然。然而农村家庭由于受教育程度底，学校也没有着重强调学习习惯，导致绝大部分朝阳小学的儿童从小学一年级开始就落后于同级平均水平。随着年级升高，差距不但无法缩小，反而不断加大。原因显而易见。每一个学期、每一个年级、每一门学科都有固定量的教学任务，这是由教材和上级考核指标所限制的。教师为完成教学总量，不得不保持一定的教学进度，没有更多的时间为大批的掉队学生补习以前缺欠的基础。由于学生缺乏自学习惯和基本技能，初中年级的教师不得不在课堂上花大量时间清扫生字词句或回顾小学三四年级的数学公式，学生也没有能力进行有意义的课堂参与。某些科目硬要让学生课堂自主学习，无异于稀释教学质量。教师们在每一堂课上都在面临进度与质量之间的矛盾、平衡和抉择。

我认为，“新课标”之不适合农村教学，并不是教学内容对于乡村儿童的生疏，而在于教学量与进度超过了农村学生的平均接受能力。矛盾的根本是：当前的学校教学活动是以脑力劳动的生活方式为前提，而以体力劳动为主的农村家庭文化很难让儿童从小形成适合学校教学的性格和习惯，以至于乡村儿童从小学一年级就跟不上学校的教学进度，差距逐年加大，到高年级已积重难返。如果农村父母无法培养孩子正确的学习习惯，那么学习习惯的培养便应该正式纳入乡村学校教育的教学内容，分配单独的时间。这意味着农村学生在低年级需要比城镇学生更多的时间去形成正确的学习习惯和巩固基础知识。除非延长整个农村基础教育阶段的学习年限，否则该阶段的知识量和进度都有向下调整的必要性。由于目前农村教学的瓶颈是学生的读写算基础技能，那么，农村教育应该花大力气加强而不是淡化基础知识和技能。继续在农村教育中推行“重能力，轻知识”的素质教育，其后果可想而知。

One night, a young teacher, Tian, came to my bedroom for a chat. A care-free and talkative young girl in her early 20s, Tian taught fifth grade Chinese class. I asked casually how many years she had worked as a teacher. “Three years,” she said. The next minute, she continued all by herself into her feelings about teaching:

“[Teaching] is becoming less and less interesting, unlike the days when I just started on the job. Now, every day is the same, the same teaching format, not creative at all. Every day is the same. The more I teach, the more upset (*mao zao*) I am. Don’t want to teach any more.”

“So, you did like teaching when you first taught?” I asked.

She nodded and said with a frown, “Right, I loved it, especially the first month as a student teacher. I felt so proud being a teacher! At that time, the [normal] school had multimedia equipment for us to prepare for classes. Other students helped me find all kinds of teaching materials. The content was rich and fun. After teaching, I had a strong sense of accomplishment. Now it is all gone. It is all the same each day. There is no sense of accomplishment at all in teaching, no creativity. I feel it [teaching] is so dull. I feel bad no matter students understand or not. I feel I teach poorly.”

“Do you mean the test scores are bad?”

“No,” she said, “I don’t measure [the quality of teaching] by test scores. I just don’t feel I am accomplishing something. I feel bad.”

Teaching in Chaoyang Elementary School was an experience of frustration. Teacher Qian was not alone. Many others also said that they used to have sincere passion for their work at the onset of the career, and yet, within one year or two, they soon burned out. Teachers with connections and other means already escaped Chaoyang to schools “outside” this mountain area. The remaining ones, especially young teachers, thought this place [Chaoyang Elementary School] had no hope.

What were the reasons that contributed to the current dismay? I brought the question to some of the veteran teachers and administrators in casual chats and formal interviews. They replied wittily: “Everyone knows the diagnosis, but nobody can provide the prescription.” Among the top culprits were poor student quality, absence of parental support, lack of administrative assistance, and finally insufficient in-service teacher training. Director Lin added another factor, the distrusting social atmosphere toward the school. Indeed, excellent schools may excel in different ways, but poorly-performing schools are usually poor in similar aspects – that is, falling apart in all aspects. This chapter focuses on the clashes between the rural lifestyle of students and parents and the school system. Chapter 6 will analyze the stifling internal administration and power relations between teachers and administrators/bureaucrats.

Coal Powders: the students

Teachers often complained that good students all left for better schools “outside” and those who stayed in Chaoyang Elementary School were mostly the poor performers. They thought that student quality was among the top reasons why the school had never succeeded in having even a single student being admitted into one of the key high schools in the county. Student loss usually concentrated at the time between grade six, the last elementary grade, and grade seven, the first grade in junior high. The elementary schools in adjacent townships were said to have not so much a difference than Chaoyang Elementary School. However, disparities in student achievement were believed to be enlarged in junior high grades, for which Chaoyang Elementary School had a notorious reputation among the villagers and parents. This was what Director Lin meant by a “distrusting social atmosphere.”

Junior high years were a crucial stage in deciding rural students’ fate in education. High achievers who managed to get into a key high school would enjoy a much higher probability of continuing on to college in the cities. Those that lagged behind would wind up their education at grade nine, or even earlier sometimes for those less patient ones. Most of these students would also march to the cities like their higher-achieving counterparts, not to the college though, but to construction sites or labor-intensive plants. Therefore, students who were serious in receiving a university education and who also had the means financially may well choose to transfer to a junior high school outside Chaoyang Township right after their graduation from the elementary school. Teachers reported that in 2006 over two-thirds of the top 50 scorers in grade six had transferred out. “Of course schools in cities or anywhere outside this mountain area fare better than we,” Teacher Huang said, “They had all the good students! Look at here. I am teaching math in the advanced class of grade eight. I guarantee you that one-third of students in my class cannot solve Math problems at grade four level. Come on! We are talking about students on the so-called fast track! Think of those kids in the slow class. Did you ever see people sifting coal lumps? Students in our mountain area are born disadvantaged comparing with the city kids. There is no large chunk of coal here in Chaoyang. Now, the relatively larger pieces are further filtered away. The leftover for us to teach are literally coal powders. And we are supposed to make them into solid chunks! That’s impossible!”

It was common to hear debasing comments on students of this kind among teachers’ casual talks. I even witnessed an old elementary teacher directly ridicule one of his students when the boy came to submit a form after the due time. The teacher said right in the boy’s face, “Late again! I tell you, that I am reputed for collecting junks. If I drive you away from the class, I am afraid no one else [teacher] would keep you in this entire region.”

It was hard for me in the beginning to accept harsh comments as such about students. Many times I suspected that teachers were making excuses for their lethargy and their failure in students' achievement. Especially, they dismissed almost every educational innovation under Quality Education in method or in content as "unsuitable for students here in the mountain area." When pressed "why," they said, "the new curriculum (*xin ke biao*) is good. It puts emphasis on cultivating creativity, students' independent skills of inquiry, habits of teamwork, emotional sensitivities. Those new textbooks are much better compiled than the ones used before, more interesting, with more pictures, diagrams, more flexible. Well, they are good, but they are not realistic. Maybe they are suitable for city students, but certainly not for students here."

I puzzled for quite some time about what was realistic and what was not since teachers hardly offered specific explanations. All they offered was the cliché arguments that students in rural areas were backward, of low quality, could not adapt to and master fancy learning methods, and the textbooks were too distanced from students' real life experiences (they have never seen a *li jiao qiao*, overlapped highway bridges, for example), so on and so forth. Similar rationale of rural-urban differences has been publicized and upheld in scholarly and popular discourses about what rural students ought to or ought not to learn. Disturbed about students' indifference to and devaluation of rural agricultural life, scholars question the necessity for rural students to know about the President of the United States or airplanes or bread and milk, rather than local history, corns, cows, or cabbages (Xiong et al., 2002). Textbooks become the means for cultural colonization of the urban lifestyle. The so-called Quality Education was utterly a luxury for rural students (Li, 1999). With due respect for people's concerns about the continuity of local culture and self-esteem of rural people, I hold deep doubts about the specious divide between the rural and the urban in regard to pedagogical issues. If we treat students' immediate physical life as the only "reality," then escalation to theoretical abstraction and understandings of a larger world would be difficult to achieve, if not entirely impossible, through education. Not to mention that some seemingly irrelevant facts about a geographically remote land may well carry a significant impact on people's everyday lives, especially under today's globalized economy.

Teachers just stopped at the conclusion that "those contents and methods were good, but not suitable for students here." Unlike scholars criticizing the textbooks, they never elaborated on safeguarding the local roots, the agricultural lifestyle, or rural communal values. Neither did they accept that urban students were inherently smarter than rural children in terms of intelligence. Then, what did they mean by saying "not realistic?" If they presupposed there were fundamental differences between urban and rural students, what differences did they indicate? Were they

trying to defend their traditional rote memorizing and banking style? Or to justify their failure in teaching by placing the blames on students? There was no ready answer. I realized that with all the effort to answer my questions they had difficulty finding the language to summarize it.

I finally figured out the meaning of “not realistic” through teachers’ casual chats over time and through my own teaching experience. Specific problems with the new curriculum and textbooks were popular topics in teachers’ chats and discussions. The two collective offices turned out to be the best site for me to collect opinions of a majority of teachers through their casual talks. One morning in September, some junior high teachers came to the elementary teachers’ collective office after class. At one point, the conversation shifted from jokes and gossips to teaching. Teachers both old and young all considered the goals and requirements in the new curriculum (*xin ke biao*) a dramatic leap from the traditional way of teaching. The new curriculum heavily depended on students independent “exploration (*tan jiu*),” investigation, self-reflection, empathizing with literary figures, which teachers “didn’t know how to teach.” Those comments were repeated many times and did not allow me a concrete idea of the hardship teachers faced. Then, Chinese teacher, Xu, told his confusions:

“I used to watch a video of demo teaching [Chinese class], done by an expert. He divided the students into two groups, and then threw out a statement. One group was to support the statement while the other group went against it. So the debate began. Students of both sides drew evidence from the essay to support their own arguments. True, the class had successfully mobilized students’ initiatives and students had to master the text in order to make powerful arguments. Yet, one question remained after I watched the entire class: at what time in the class to deal with the basics, like new words, phrases, sentence structure, and analysis of passages?”

At that moment, the question struck me as reasonable but too plain to have any analytical value. I did not understand the significance he attached to the basics until a month later when I had some real taste of teaching in my politics class. Students lacked the training in basic habits of learning: they never prepared for the new content before the class; never reviewed the lesson afterwards; never took notes during the lecture if not told so; took notes on pieces of scrap paper which got lost the second day; often misspelled even the most commonly used words; did not complete homework unless punished. In the end, it was almost impossible for students to accumulate what they had learned over time. Soon, I found myself joining the teachers in complaining about students’ performances.

For subjects like Chinese, Math, Physics, and English, in which later advance heavily relied on early accumulations, the higher the grades, the more headaches did teachers have in dealing with the basics. “Junior high students could not even properly read and write or understand the basic meanings of the texts. How are you going to

expect them to empathize with the author or the characters in the literature? The essays just had no impact at all on their feelings. They are just numb,” said Chinese teacher, Wei. I used to sit in her Chinese lecture for ninth grade, the fast class. She spent three periods on one classic essay by Mengzi, *I Like Fish* (*yu wo suo yu ye*). The first period was completely spent on words and phrases, the second on the meanings of each sentence and paragraph, and finally the last period on the structure of the essay. There was no time, and no intention from the teacher either, to discuss the moral and philosophical significance of this piece of classic literature. Wei later said, “Normally this piece should be covered within two periods, according to the teacher’s reference book. I already allowed one extra period for it because it is ancient language and requires more time on the basics. Don’t expect the students to consult the dictionary for words and phrases before the class. They expect me, the teacher, to clear the basics for them in class. And that takes time.” Her experience was true to many Chinese teachers in the school across the grades. Teachers spent a big chunk of class time explaining meanings of new words and phrases. The majority of the students simply ignored teachers’ requirement on before-class preparation. However, in urban schools, students were expected to understand these basics beforehand by checking in the dictionary on their own, *by grade three*, according to an elementary teacher in the county. In Chaoyang Elementary School, even teachers in ninth grade still had to take up the tasks that should have been accomplished way earlier in elementary years.

Thus, it was natural to hear teachers from higher grades to blame the lower grade teachers for their failure to “lay a solid foundation” for students’ future learning. In the end, teachers in grade one or grade two would be ultimately held accountable, following this logic. Many teachers agreed that the lower elementary grades were most important to shape students’ habits and lay a good foundation for later advancement. Nevertheless, with the limited pool of faculty, the more capable ones usually had to be assigned to teach graduating grades or junior high grades, as explained in the previous chapter.

This year, joined by six graduates from two-year colleges, Chaoyang Elementary School made some changes in personnel arrangement. The grade one class in the central school for the first time had a Chinese teacher, Qu, who had a college education. Qu did make efforts in “laying the foundation” for the children. She spent much time in teaching *pinyin*, the Roman letter system of pronunciation, which was one of the two main indexes for entry search in Chinese dictionaries. Two months into the semester, I met her one day in the collective office. She told me with anxiety, “Kids don’t do homework at home. I already add an extra class in the afternoon for them to finish homework before going home. Their parents don’t care. Most moms and papas have left home for work in cities. The kids were left with their grandparents.

The grandmas and grandpas cannot help at all with their coursework. One boy even told me that his parents told him not to do homework! So, I have to go very slowly. You see, I have spent one month and a half on *pinyin*, but half of the students still cannot master it. Supposedly there are only two weeks for *pinyin*. I have over 60 kids. That [the class size] slows me down as well.” She opened the textbook and pointed to her teaching progression in the Table of Content: “Half of the semester has passed, I only covered one-third of the textbook. How am I able to finish the book within the semester?”

Qu’s comments were typical among teachers in two ways. Firstly, although junior high grades put the blame on elementary grades, higher elementary grades on lower elementary grades, ultimately teachers of all grades would trace the roots of problems outside the school walls into students’ families. Partially, teachers’ shared discontent toward parents became a buffer among teachers of different grades, preventing bitter finger-pointing among the faculty. Second, in everyday work, teachers had to constantly strike a balance between students’ learning needs and the pace of progression required of them. The higher the grade, the more likely that the concern for “finishing” the book would overwhelm because exams were pressing and students’ ever-growing knowledge gaps increasingly made any thorough review impractical.

Low Quality: the Parents

Teachers held mixed feelings towards students’ families. On one hand, they sympathized with the parents for their poor “economic conditions (*jin ji tiao jian*).” Teachers estimated that half to two-thirds of the students had at least one parent, mostly the fathers, working as manual labors in the county or more distant cities. At least one-third of students had both parents working away from home in urban areas. Students lived with grandparents, many of whom were illiterate. There were no newspapers, books, or magazines at home, because of economic stringency and illiteracy of the adults in the family. Every year, a couple of parents came home injured, handicapped, or even dead due to accidents in construction sites and illegal coal mines. Teachers were usually sympathetic for such misfortunes. During my short stay in Chaoyang, the father of one girl in ninth grade died in a coal mine accident. Her family called the school, asking the girl to go home on the weekend to attend the burial ceremony. Teachers did not tell her the truth. In the collective office, the head teacher Han said, “I tell her that there is a big family gathering in the weekend. Many of her relatives will come to visit.” Teacher Peng added, “I know! She told me with excitement that all her relatives will come and it must be a very special family event. She is looking forward to it.” Han said, “Poor thing! I will escort her back home on

Saturday and tell her the truth on the way.” Another teacher half joked, “Well, you treat her well because she is a girl and a high achiever. If this happens to a poor-performing boy, you must directly tell him, ‘Your dad died. Go home!’” Many teachers laughed. Teacher Qiu, a young man, couldn’t bear such a joke and disagreed slightly, “You guys are so cruel!” Peng raised her head and refuted, “Don’t be pretentious! You think we are all cold-hearted people?”

On the other hand, teachers were sometimes furious for the lack of cooperation from students’ families. “You won’t believe it!” teachers told me, “Some parents never come to school [voluntarily]. Others come having absolutely no idea which grade the child was in or who the child’s teacher is.” I came across several cases when parents came to look for their children. Indeed, they would ask whoever they got hold of on the playground: “Do you know so and so [the child’s name]?” “No. Which grade or class?” “Oh, I am not sure.” “Who is the head teacher?” “I don’t know either.”

When parents did come to the teacher voluntarily, teachers were not happy about it either, because they came for troubles. One morning, Qu, the young first grade head teacher, met one mother right outside the collective offices. “I am looking for teacher Qu of grade one,” a short dark-colored woman in a yellowish T-shirt said loudly. It rained earlier in the morning. She wore a pair of black rubber rain boots, her pants rolled up half way of the legs, with a long black well-worn umbrella in hand. She complained to Qu that it has been a month into the semester but her son had not received the math textbook yet. Also, the desks of other children were brand new ones provided by the school free of charge (because of new government subsidies), but her son was using his own old desk bought from last year. In effect, the boy should be in grade two. Yet, after two weeks of the new semester, the parents decided to switch him down to grade one. It was a unique phenomenon in Chaoyang Elementary School that parents or students requested to change grade or class spontaneously and the school would not intervene as long as teachers involved agreed upon the new arrangement.

The mother pointed at Teacher Qu and spoke angrily: “I will go take away the desk right now! If you do not give my student a new desk, I will come back for you again! If you don’t give him the math book, I will come after you for the 60 yuan. I paid the money for my son to study here.” Her stress finally rested upon “paid the money.” Qu was just turning 20, a girl of small size and low voice. She explained slowly to the mother: “It is my fault that I forgot about the desk. You can remove your own desk, but wait till the end of this class. The class is still in session. I told the school leaders [*ling dao*] about the text book. The school does not have extra textbooks. He [the boy] may use his old one from last year.” The mother’s loud voice soon attracted eight or nine teachers out from the collective offices. They stood on the

side of Teacher Qu in a half circle. Maybe, the parent saw no way to solve the problems immediately, or was intimidated by the sheer number of teachers. She started to step backward to the doorway of the school while repeating her complaints. Two steps backward, still unsatisfied, she would rush several steps forward again to Teacher Qu, pointing at her face and warning repeatedly: "I paid the money! You got to remember those things!"

I didn't get to see the whole episode end because Principal Luo called me to his office in the midst of the drama. When I returned, the woman was walking away. Teachers still gathered outside the offices talking about the incident and ridiculing the mother. Teacher Peng was one of the most excited one: "Look at those parents! It is like teachers are indebted to them!" At my request, she recounted with victorious content and excitement: "Teacher Qu is too young to handle this type of parents. So I told the parent: 'the head teacher has reported to the school leaders about the desk and the textbook. She should not be held accountable. You should talk with the principals.' Of course, the parent was struck speechless and responded with anger: 'I don't know any of your principals! You think I want to come to your school? No! I don't care to come if not for these troubles.' I followed up immediately with smiles [and satire]: 'Right, right, of course! Once you put your student in the school, good or bad it is all the school's responsibilities. You don't care to know in which direction the school gate is, who teaches your student, or who the school leaders are. Perhaps you won't remember how your student looks before long!'" Peng continued with self-appreciation: "I caught her right there! She had nothing to respond. Finally, she had to manage a smile and said: 'Of course I know how my student looks. I won't forget that!' At last, we directed her to the Vice Principal, Lu." Teachers appeared to be amused by this unexpected instance. One teacher commented: "Teachers are already upset at such low pay. We are not going to be bullied even by parents." Another teacher laughed, "Exactly! Good timing for an outlet!" Peng said, "Those matters are the jobs of the school leaders. Why come to trouble teachers?" Later, the teachers and I saw the woman following Vice Principal Lu into the storage room and coming out with a new desk and chair. She moved the desk and the chair into the classroom, all alone. No one offered a hand.

Teachers wished that parents in "this mountain area" could cooperate in the way the urban parents assisted their children. Parents in cities, they said, sent their children to good kindergartens before school age, where children could learn *pinyin*, numbers, and simple poems, while parents in Chaoyang let their kids run wild in the mountains. So in the first grade of the elementary school, teachers and students were merely repeating and reviewing what had been learned in the kindergarten. No wonder they could lay a solid foundation! It was easier to teach in urban schools. However, in Chaoyang Elementary School, students lost to their city counterparts at the starting

line. Plus, city parents were better educated than the rural parents. They were willing and capable to assist and monitor students to finish homework and to keep frequent contact with teachers to update with students' behaviors in school. Here in Chaoyang, parents seldom showed up; when they did, often times they came to pick on teachers. Parents didn't care about students' learning. They kept kids in school for the purpose of babysitting. I happened to witness two grandmas begging a teacher to keep their grandsons in the school. Both in the slow class of grade nine, the students were caught stealing money to play computer games overnight on the street. One grandma begged the teacher, "His parents are away working in the cities. Grandpa and I are not able to discipline the kid at home. We have nothing more to expect. It is only half a year from graduation. Please let him sit through junior high and then he can go out to look for work in the city¹. If you don't keep him, what are we going to do with him at home for this half year?" To sum up in teacher's word: "the quality of parents is too low!"

These comparisons were employed by teachers to account for their hardship in their work. I understand there were multiple meanings behind the complaints about students and parents. When in contrast with reputable urban schools or teachers, deficient students and parents became a way Chaoyang teachers defended themselves. In absence of such contrast, students' and parents' quality were invoked to express teachers' feeling of frustration. In addition, a boundary was clearly drawn between school and family in teachers' comments. The school, and thus teachers themselves, were not in the position and not able to correct the wrongs in the family, which ultimately implied that the wrongs within the school were futile to combat. Interestingly, teachers without any knowledge about the theory of cultural capital had developed similar insights in their own language. Living with them and teaching the same group of students, I had to admit that their analysis was well-grounded and should not be dismissed as defensive excuses for their own failure in the work.

However, I did disagree with teachers in the conclusion. Where teachers saw "low quality" students and families, I saw the clash of the rural lifestyle and the city-oriented school culture. Usually, the cultural clash was widely perceived by scholars as the degree of familiarity with the specific content of learning. For example, rural students had more difficulties than urban children to learn about airplanes, NBA stars, or Internet search tools because these contents were disconnected to the real life experiences in rural areas—so went the received wisdom. In addition, it was said to be a "cultural deficiency" of rural parents that they often times did not attach enough significance to their children's education. The cultural clash I observed was different from both interpretations above.

¹ Migrant workers need to hold a graduation certificate from a junior high school in order to work legally in cities.

In addition to the disadvantages in economic means, like scarce access to computers, books, magazines, lab facilities, the Internet, rural students and parents were fundamentally disadvantaged, firstly, by the behavioral disciplines intrinsically associated with the way of learning centered around reading, writing, and logical thinking, and secondly, by the bureaucratic and age-based school organizational structure. Learning activities evolving around reading, writing, and reasoning required a particular set of behavioral habits, including the habits of sitting down quietly, concentrating when reading and listening, accumulating facts, practicing, writing with clear strokes, keeping books and stationeries well organized. In other words, learning needed a considerable amount of self-discipline, which did not come to children naturally. These basic behavioral habits ultimately would shape students' characters as well as their academic outcomes.

For urban children, if these habits were not intentionally inculcated by their parents, most children were at least sent to the kindergarten as early as 3 years old. By the time they entered the first grade in an elementary school at age 6 or 7, not only had they already learned simple reading, writing, calculating, singing, drawing, dancing, even more importantly, they also became accustomed to the classroom order and the whole set of disciplines required by the school. The rural families, in contrast, often times could not afford or did not care to pay for the kindergarten while kindergartens in townships or villages were of much lower quality as well. Therefore, the task of students' cultural assimilation into the school setting largely rested on parents for rural children.

However, I frequently saw rural adults sharing similar problems with rural children in regard to learning habits. Most likely, rural residents who could successfully adapt themselves to the school culture had already advanced into the workforce in urban areas through schooling. Thus, the rural society was left with a population ill-adapted to the disciplinary and structural culture of the school. Reading and writing used to be considered irrelevant to peasants' life. As Director Lin recalled, when he was a primary school boy, his father would beat him up for writing homework instead of cutting grass for their pigs. That was the old generation, though. Today, the mindset of rural parents had changed. Unlike the criticism for their negligence of education, rural parents urged their children to "listen to teachers" and "study hard" in school so the children would enjoy a better future than themselves. Schooling as a springboard for upward social mobility was taken to heart by rural parents. Unfortunately, the devil is in the detail. The problem was, they didn't know how.

Despite the change in rural people's attitude toward education, two barriers still remained. For one, textbook knowledge learned in school in no way connected with the agrarian work or even manual work in cities. For manual laborers, peasants and

workers alike, voluntary reading and writing were not essential skills for their livelihood. There was a clear divide between manual labor and intellectual labor. Habits derived from intellectual activities were simply not part of the rural life. If rural parents ever learned anything in school, they were likely to have forgotten it by the time their children needed their assistance. Also, if the adults failed to make it through junior high (the average school year for rural population was 7), most likely they themselves were not aware of the importance of necessary behavioral habits. Secondly, they appeared to have only a vague idea about the organizational structure of a school. Some parents came to school not knowing their children were anchored to a grade and a class; others decided to switch students' grades back and forth. The mother aforementioned was struck speechless when teachers unexpectedly put up the shield of the bureaucratic division of labor to dismiss her protest. To me, these instances suggested that rural parents lacked the basic understanding about the organizational culture. For instance, students and teachers were broken into grades and classes, grades were age-based groupings, each grade had its unique academic goals and contents, and the faculty was arranged in a bureaucratic hierarchy, which resulted in complicated contentions between teachers and the administrators. However, the school culture, both behavioral and structural, was tacit knowledge for urban adults, who usually received at least high school education (over 90%). The school with its special behavior disciplines, organizational structures, and bureaucratic institutions, was an unfamiliar cultural system transplanted on the rural territory, imposing itself on the lifestyle of rural populations.

These cultural barriers, on top of economic disadvantages, further hampered rural parents' capacity in assisting their children's school education: they could not help with academic coursework, or behavioral disciplines, or constructive relations with teachers. When a child fared poorly in school, the parents either quickly lost expectation for the child or lost their temper and beat the child to "teach him a good lesson." My impression was that the former more often happened to girls and the latter to boys. Either way, children were left with no practical solution to the obstacles they encountered in school day in and day out. Lacking the know-how, parents' stress on their children's education seemed to be hollow words in the end.

Speed or Quality: the Teaching

The clash between the school culture and rural lifestyle was interpreted by teachers as "the low quality" of the students and the parents. The interpretation betrayed teachers' conception that students should have come to school with certain level of preparation—behavioral, academic, or cultural—appropriate for school life. Such preparation for those prerequisite "qualities" was considered exclusively the

responsibility of the family, hence a divide in the functions between school and family. Indeed, the school system was set up predicated on this divide. The curriculum and the gradation system were set up in a way disregarding the disparities among students within one class or across geographic areas. No matter students resided in the county, the township, or the village, well or ill prepared, they would have to proceed with the same textbooks at the same pace of learning as long as they were in the same grade. It was almost impossible to tease out whether it was out of personal beliefs or out of obligation to perform the job requirements that Chaoyang teachers held the school-family division of functions, because, once routinized, the external restraints immersed into minute daily activities, altering teachers' mindset without being realized.

As the result of the routinized school practices, these cultural mismatches between the school system and the "low quality" students and their families were played out on a daily scale in teachers' work in forms of students' trivial but nerve-racking misbehaviors, lapse in homework, plagiarism, distractions and indifference in class. Behind teachers' complaints about all these trifles was the constant anxiety about the pace of progression, just as expressed in Teacher Qu's worries: "Half of the semester had passed, I only covered one-third of the textbook. How am I able to finish the book within the semester?"

Teachers were entrusted by the school, the county educational bureau, and ultimately the state to impart a certain amount of knowledge to the students within a certain time span, usually segmented into semesters. Each semester, the teacher was responsible for covering an entire textbook for his/her subject, a textbook compiled by experts and chosen by educational officials. Teachers' reference books, which came with the textbooks, would suggest class hours for each lesson. Too fast, students would have a hard time grappling with the content. The math teacher, Yu, who was despised by other teacher because he often missed his classes, was said to cover 20 pages, i.e. 10 lessons, within a single class hour (45 minutes), perhaps to make up the lessons lagged behind. The head teacher of the class, Li, scorned Yu's irresponsibility to me: "Students were not only riding aircraft, but riding rockets!" He pointed to the sky with one finger, mocking the acceleration of a rocket. However, if teachers taught too slowly, they risked not completing the required work load, like in Teacher Qu's case. Around mid-term, Director Lin informally checked with teachers about their progression. In the weekly faculty meeting, he reminded the teachers: "Half of the semester will have passed by next week. Please pay attention to your teaching speeds. Some of you are close to finishing while others are lingering at the first few pages."

Corresponding tests would be administered by the school or the educational bureau to evaluate achievements, which also functioned as a mechanism to monitor the progression of the textbook delivery. Teachers' anxiety about the speed and

Director Lin's reminder made perfect sense only under the pressure of these exams. Exam papers were usually ordered from external sources to guarantee an objective evaluation, so to speak. For mid-term exams, Chaoyang Elementary School used the exam papers produced by the county educational bureau. One week before the exam, the chemistry teacher, Ke, walked angrily into the luncheon room where young teacher had meals on week days. "Director Lin told me the mid-term exam on chemistry will cover 4 units of the textbook. I told him I just finished 3 so far. Maybe those questions about unit four should be left out. He did not agree and scolded me for moving too slowly. What am I going to do? Fly through the unit in one week? Who the heck controls the pace of teaching, anyway? He or I? Speed is important, but quality also needs to be guaranteed." Mismatches like this existed here and there in mid-term exams or monthly exams, where negotiation remained possible. However, the end-semester final exams were the hard measure and directly linked with teachers' bonuses. By then, every teacher was supposed to finish the assigned textbook or to suffer economic loss for poor exam scores.

Final tests were like a sword hanging over every teacher's head. Yet, essentially, it was a catch for teachers. Good examination scores depended not only on completion of the textbook, but also on the effectiveness of imparting the knowledge. For students in Chaoyang Elementary School, who persistently performed way below grade requirement since early elementary school, keeping up with the normal pace of teaching, i.e. allocation of periods for each unit or lesson suggested by the teacher's reference book, meant sacrificing the quality of teaching and learning. As shown previously, short of the behavioral habits and familial environment amicable to school learning, students in Chaoyang Elementary School needed more time to grasp the same amount of facts or skills. Training in habits and molding their characters ought to be made part of the curriculum for these children if successful education was contingent upon these habits and characters, which these children were not born with by nature. The higher the grade, the harder and slower would it be to introduce the new knowledge to the students if they had lagged behind since the beginning. Moreover, the textbook contained objects, notions, and places, unfamiliar to rural children, which also demanded more time for explanation. Apparently, these practical barriers facing rural students were not taken into consideration when textbooks were compiled in a way in which advanced students in city key schools were expected to spend the same amount of class time as their way-behind rural counterparts. Completing the textbook on time would leave more students further behind. Slowing down to accommodate students' needs risked completion of the textbook. It was a losing battle: either way, the exam result would hardly look good.

Different teachers had different strategies to cope with the dilemma. Math teacher Yu, who could not care less about students' achievement, was said to dedicate

sometimes an entire class to a single exercise question, and other times go over 20 lessons without stop within one hour. Some teachers proceeded in accordance with the instructions on the teacher's reference book unresponsive to students' levels of reception. Still many other teachers constantly struggled on the speed of teaching, trying to strike a balance between students' reception and the required teaching pace.

These struggles on pace, on completing the planned content, were at play in minute pedagogical decisions in every school day. Often, I sat in the classroom and saw the teacher ask a question in class, call on two or three students, and get the wrong answers or many times no answer at all except silence. At this point, the teacher would have to make a decision whether to try another student or to provide the correct answer to save time. Predominantly, teachers would choose to move on by giving out the answer. English teacher, Luo, said, "I won't call on the students in the back [of the classroom]. They could not understand a bit and there is no time for me to correct them. Or I will never finish any teaching plan. So I just make sure the top few can get by." Math teacher, Huang, expressed many times that he would only slow down for the top five or six students. Because question-answers with individual students were usually unsuccessful, teachers often avoided calling on individual students, letting the class answer collectively. Understandably, questions suitable for collective answers were substantially limited to either reading out the original texts from the book or completing the teacher's sentences where the answers were obvious. Neither were genuine questions that encouraged independent thinking. Students of all grades in Chaoyang Elementary School had a monotonous tune when reading any kind of texts, a flat tone and rhythm applied to any passage or essay, with no natural ups and downs, pauses or shifts coming with the meaning of the texts, demanding no emotion to or understanding of the text from the readers. The frequent collective read-out in class made a significant contribution to this lazy fashion of reading, since students had to adjust themselves to a neutral tune in order to read in one voice, which subdued all independent understandings and individual emotions in recitation. Also, completing the teacher's sentences led students to not reflect over the question per se, but to guess the teacher's intentions. These side effects again perpetuated parts of students' poor learning habits and contributed to poor exam performances in the end. Therefore, the struggle over teaching schedule and student achievement was a losing battle in my eyes. Yet, teachers somehow had each developed an acceptable balance between speed and performance. To some extent, I guess, they had to.

Only with full awareness of teachers' concern about the pace could we start to make sense of teachers' critique on the new student-centered curriculum and teaching methods as "unsuitable" and "unrealistic" for "kids in mountain areas." I never heard teachers argue against the contents of the textbooks on the ground that learning about London Tower, globalization, Microsoft, NBA, Shakespeare, independent thinking

skills, and research skills, was inappropriate for these students for the lack of immediate relevance to their lives. Most comments, if not all, were positive in regard to the changes in content. The textbooks in and of themselves were considered by teachers to be much more interesting and enjoyable than before, “but...” There was always this critical shift “but” – “but it is so difficult for us to teach!”

It turned out that the new difficulty was mainly a procedural and technical concern about time. The new textbooks had an increase in information quantity. For example, the English textbooks used to be organized in lessons. Each lesson was a dialogue or a passage with specific notations on new words and the focal grammar point for sentence drilling. “It was clear and easier for students to know which words and grammars they should put their stress on for each lesson,” said English teacher, Liu. She showed me the new textbook, “Now it is organized in units. Each unit contains A, B, C, D four sections with dialogues, short passages, letters, posters, diagrams, pictures, listening comprehension, and myriad forms of practices. Every section often times involves multiple grammatical knowledge points and lots of new words. I don’t know where to put the emphasis. Plus, each section is assigned one period. It is so difficult even to go over all the stuff within one period.” Students above grade four had self study time in the evening. It was common for teachers to continue in the evening classes with the new lesson incomplete during the day or to save class time for next day. The increase in the content of textbooks disturbed the delicate balance managed by teachers between the pace and the quality of teaching.

The student-centered teaching methods aggravated the anxiety over the disturbed balance. Math teacher, Huang, said, “The teacher’s reference book requires that students should independently arrive at the theory with the assistance of the teacher. Teachers can not straightforwardly tell the students. Well, they can’t even do math problems of fourth grade. How can they arrive to the theory by themselves?” Chinese teacher, Wen, in his mid-20s, once described his classroom interactions: “Once you [the teacher] ask a question, all [students’] heads lower down. You call on one student. He/she stands up, head down, swaying from side to side, sometimes playing with a pen or pencil at hand, without speaking a single word.” Another day, he expressed frustration with the new textbook: “nowadays, the textbook requires the students to come up with their own opinions, feelings, and imaginations. Teachers cannot give out the answers directly. But those students never think for themselves. They are not able to think for themselves. Teachers say ‘it is a circle’ and they will say ‘it is a circle.’ Teachers say ‘it is a square’ and they will say ‘it is a square.’ [If] you [the teacher] ask them for their own opinions, they just sit still and look at you in loss. At the end of the class, they would learn nothing.” I fully understood him. In many classes I sat in or taught, the moments when students responded to the teacher with silence or multiple “incorrect” answers were embarrassing to both the teacher and the

students. The teacher would be looking around the classroom for any chance to make eye contact with students who might have the potential or eagerness to answer the question. Yet, the students all lowered their heads and eyes to avoid eye contact with the teacher. The deadlock had to be broken by someone, mostly the teacher, providing the correct answer so both the teacher and the students could be relieved and the class could move on. These stalemates robbed away class time. If the teacher insisted on not giving out the answer directly, the deadlocks would be unbearably prolonged, the teaching plan disrupted, and students ended up “learning nothing.” Giving out the answer did not necessarily mean that the students had “learned something.” Anyway, “as long as one student in the class knows it [the content of teaching], it proves that I have taught it. I have done my job!” one teacher used to say. So, the traditional “teacher-centered” strategy satisfied several demands: saving time, a chance for some students to “get it,” fulfilling the job requirement on the part of the teacher, and perhaps self-comfort for the teacher for soothing their conscience on the work.

The fancy methods of “student-centered” teaching were proved to be impractical in a demonstration class given by a teacher from the county’s best elementary school. Teamwork was another buzz word in new teaching methods. During my stay in Chaoyang, the county Institute of Teacher Training sent a group of county teachers to Chaoyang Elementary School to teach two demonstration classes. The demo math class to third graders was on the concept and the measurement of “perimeter.” The teacher re-organized the class seats into 6 groups and provided tool kits for students to measure perimeters of multiple objects. The group activities turned out to be loose and ineffective. Math teachers in Chaoyang who observed the class all dismissed the teamwork schema with contempt: “Students were never trained in such group activities. It won’t work. A normal class has 45 minutes. Her class took over one hour, and yet, the students did not quite understand the concept of perimeter. No to mention she only had half of the class for the purpose of demonstration. With the full class size, she would get 12 groups. The class may well extend into two hours!”

In my view, teachers did not raise questions about whether the content or methods required by the new curriculum were legitimate or appropriate. Neither did they argue that these knowledge or skills were inherently incomprehensible to their “students in this mountain area.” Rather, to me, they were principally concerned about the efficiency of teaching. For these students to “learn” these knowledge and skills, the student-centered methods would take significantly longer than the so-called traditional didactics because these higher thinking skills and creative capacities had to be built upon strict prior trainings in essential basics, both accumulative facts and behavioral habits. In my own teaching, I assisted students to conduct group investigations on topics of their own interest. Even under my daily supervision, still only one group ever completed their project. That simple project took them five

weeks, doubled the time of my original two-week plan. Such flexibility in time arrangement was a pure unaffordable luxury for the teachers because their work load and pace was externally determined by the textbooks and closely monitored and evaluated through examinations.

Evil Examinations?

It would be too simplistic to conclude that examinations were the culprit for the illnesses in Chaoyang Elementary School, although such a statement would confirm the pre-conceived judgment of many people. Here, it is worth a bit elaboration to clarify the functions and effects of examinations. Tests were employed to achieve multiple purposes. Sometimes the Education Bureau would randomly select a grade to compare student achievement cross the entire county. In Fall 2006, the Education Bureau decided to choose grade six as the sample grade in the final exam. All elementary schools in the county would be ranked by their average test scores. Most embarrassingly, schools with the three lowest average scores would be publicly announced in the county. Those three unfortunate principals were to be held accountable. Chaoyang Elementary School, which stood at 50th place in the pool of 58 schools last year, had a rather big chance to drop to the bottom since the sixth graders this year were even poorer according to the teachers. Anxious about losing face in front of colleagues of the entire county, Principal Luo suddenly tensed up over the test results of grade six. Therefore, one of the paramount goals for the semester was to secure a place above 56th in the rank. Tying test scores with individual school principals' personal stakes, tests in this case functioned as a distant-control technique utilized by the state as a whip on local school staff.

For other grades absent of the state requirement on test scores, tests remained a crucial measure not so much for monitoring the achievement of students, but for allocating school resources, deciding social status among teachers, and in short, for the purpose of organizational management and control within the school. For instance, teachers would be categorized into five classes based on the average test scores of their classes, which in turn corresponded to five classes of bonus distribution. For each outstanding scorer in the class, the teacher could glean extra bonuses. Some teachers also offered monetary reward to students to encourage high test scores, for example 10 yuan for the top scorer. Although associated with varied institutional as well as personal stakes, it seemed to me that testing was used at all levels as the major incentive device for quality control.

The quality of teaching/learning was symbolized by test scores. This conception of "educational quality" had been under assault for quite a long time. Researchers, theorists, practitioners, and general lay people all agreed that high scores did not

necessarily indicate high creativity or operational skills. Without denying the validity of the critique, I think, for Chaoyang Elementary School or maybe thousands of rural schools alike, such concern was largely irrelevant. For Chaoyang Elementary School, the problem was not of “high score - low ability,” but of “low score – low ability.” Test scores might not be able to detect student genuine capacity at the high end, but they obviously had a much higher association with student mastery of the subject at the low end. In one of the grade six monthly tests, the average scores of the three classes respectively were 62.4, 59.6, and 55.5 on the Chinese test, and 34.05, 31.02, and 26.9 on the math test, all out of a 100-point scale. More than 20 students across the grade got single-digit scores on math, with the lowest one at 3.5 points. These statistics made a splash in school especially among the administrators and junior high teachers. “3.5?!” Director Lin burst out, “One can hit 3.5 points just by wild guess with eyes closed! This student apparently learned nothing in his previous five years of math classes!” Teachers in grade six reported that students blundered on knowledge that was covered in grade one or two. For grade one, the end-semester final exam results averaged around 60 (out of 100) for both Chinese and math in Chaoyang Elementary School while teachers in county schools considered an average of 80 as the passing score. No wonder when moving up into junior high, students in slow classes had average scores between 15 and 20 out of 100 for every single subject. Sadly, the slow classes comprised 70% of the student body in junior high Department. Corresponding to their bottom-level test scores, these students lacked the basic mathematic skills, wrote in simple broken sentences full of spelling mistakes, and had difficulty understanding texts written in language other than the colloquial style. Thus, for poorly performing students and students in lower grades, tests were a reasonable and effective barometer, in this case, to monitor students’ mastery of rudimentary facts.

Therefore, the meanings of test scores differed between rural schools like Chaoyang and key schools in urban areas. The distinction was determined by the characteristics of the student bodies. Having acquired the skills of basic reading and writing, students in key schools were usually faced with the challenges of so-called higher thinking skills and creative capacities, many of which the paper-and-pen tests were not sufficient to bring out. However, the majority of students in Chaoyang Elementary School, as I have emphasized the scale several times, persistently performed way below the grade requirement since early elementary years. The greatest obstacles, in my view, came from students’ failure in accumulating the basic facts and skills, which resulted from the behavioral and institutional mismatch between the school culture and the rural lifestyle. Tests in the rural context could be a meaningful way to pressure students to perform on par on the essential facts and skills.

Unfortunately, recent years had witnessed a nation-wide reform tide of eliminating exams in elementary schools regardless of rural students' practical problems. Admissions to junior high schools no longer required passing exams. Tests were still administered to assess teachers' performance and to sort students into junior high schools of varied reputations. "Even if a student got 0 in the test, he or she still has a middle school to attend. Maybe a bad school, like in Chaoyang, but the school had to admit him or her no matter how unqualified the student is," said junior high teachers in Chaoyang. Abolishing the admission test barriers was intended to guarantee rural students the nine-year compulsory education promised by the government. Yet, for the majority of students in Chaoyang Elementary School, this measure only guaranteed nine years of sitting in school, not necessarily nine years of education. The laxness on tests opened the door to an even more diluted pedagogy.

The critical question was not whether the exams should be abandoned; the fault was not the exams per se. The exams were intimately tied up with the curriculum and textbooks that failed to account for the cultural barriers confronting rural students. Those cultural gaps between the students and the curriculum should not be understood merely in terms of students' unfamiliarity with the learning contents. Such strangeness did exist, but it was by no means insurmountable. It only demanded longer time.

Time was the key to understand Chaoyang students' disadvantages as well as teachers' constant apprehension on keeping the pace especially with the new curriculum. Because of insufficient habitual, behavioral, and institutional preparations, rural students performed behind the grade level from the first grade. Yet, the river of time never stopped for them to catch up. New knowledge was programmed to be introduced at a universal schedule insensitive to students' differences and beyond the control of the students or the teachers. Behind this curriculum schedule was the age-based grouping system of school grades. However diverse the students were in their ethnic, economic, social, intellectual, physical, or familial backgrounds, once they were categorized into the same school grade, they were assumed to be of equal capacity, hence the homogeneous pedagogical treatment and the legitimate expectation for similar achievements, usually evaluated by test scores. When the achievement standard was set higher than what the practical conditions of the rural students allowed, these cultural disadvantages were translated into poor exam scores for students and never-ending struggles between teaching speed and students' receptions on the part of teachers.

The exam scores always attracted most attention. Yet, by the time the examinations, especially those high-stake exams, broadcast the shocking achievement gaps, such as the 3.5 point math score, rounds of silent, dragging, and daily battles on time, on speed, on the clash between the school culture and the rural habitus had

approached the destined finale. As long as the curriculum continues to exclude the essential cultural adaptation process needed by rural students and teacher remains merely a pre-programmed transmission tool between the students and the textbooks, this destiny is unlikely to change.

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